

THE CATTLE BARONS' RISE AND FALL:
A HISTORY OF WESTERN CATTLE RANCHING IN THE MOUNTAINS
AND ON THE PLAINS OF MONTANA AND WYOMING
FROM 1865 UNTIL THE END OF THE CATTLE BARONS

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by

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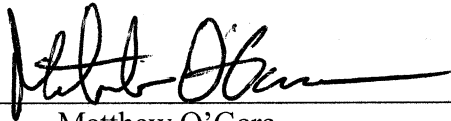
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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the history about western cattle ranching during the period of the cattle barons (1860s-1890s). It focuses upon the states of Montana and Wyoming with a prime focus upon the plains regions of the state. It covers the topic of where the cattle came from and why they were brought into the state. It also touches upon the development of the plains and how this impacted the cattle barons and their future, including the investment by foreign capital. This includes the coming of settlers, barbed wire, and the railroad to the states. This paper covers the struggles that the ranchers faced such as rustlers and how the cattle barons in Wyoming and Montana differed in their handling of this threat. It also discusses what brought about the end of the cattle barons in these two states including the blizzard of 1886-87 and the homesteaders' changes to the area.

INTRODUCTION

Ewen Cameron came to Montana from England to raise polo ponies but did not possess the necessary capital. “In late 1892 he had entered into a partnership with one of eastern Montana’s prominent ‘cattle kings,’ Henry Tusler...Tusler and his wife lived in Miles City, but they owned several ranches south of Terry, including the Eve and a neighboring place run by his twenty-two-year-old nephew.”¹ This excerpt from Donna Lucey’s biography of the photographer Evelyn Cameron sums up the reason for my interest in this subject. My family still owns and operates the ranch south of Terry that bordered the Eve, albeit at a smaller scale than the 1800s, and this is where I grew up. Because of my families’ deep roots in ranching in Eastern Montana since its beginning I’ve always been fascinated by the history of ranching itself, especially in Montana and Wyoming. This interest is what has prompted me to research and write this paper on the so-called “cattle barons” of Montana and Wyoming.

Western cattle ranching has played an important role in the development of America. Longhorns driven north from Texas covering the rolling hills of the plains as far as the eye could see is a popular mental image that many have of the American West. This idea is a false one however, as the earliest cattle came from different breeds and often were driven east, not north. Cattle ranchers were among the first pioneers to settle a region while in search of fresh grazing ground for their beef. This is especially true in Montana and Wyoming. These states saw the start of ranching after the Civil War and have experienced its many ups and downs throughout time from the start of ranching to supply miners with beef, the rise of large corporation ranches and cattle barons, to the eventual fall of these systems. This paper seeks to better examine the origins

¹ Donna M. Lucey, *Photographing Montana: 1894-1928: The Life and Work of Evelyn Cameron*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990). Evelyn Cameron was an English photographer who homesteaded the Eastern Montana plains with her husband Ewen and took numerous photographs of her new found lifestyle.

of ranching in these two states, how the cattle barons came to be, and the troubles that they faced, and why they eventually fell.

Ranching in the Northern States of the Mid-West really began to take off after the civil war. Cattle were driven to the wide-open grazing grounds of the Eastern Montana plains to be fattened for slaughter in the processing plants of the East. Cattle were also driven into the mountainous regions and meadows to provide beef to the hard rock miners as well as fatten on the high country meadows. The advent of cattle for mining began as soon as miners discovered gold within the regions. Beef to supply these miners soon followed. The cattle in these regions also came from numerous and varied sources. Many of these sources are not currently well known. These small ranches eventually gave way to large corporation ranches and massive open-range ranches controlled by the group of men known as the cattle baron. Their rise and fall is both historically important to the region and can provide us with the lessons to be learned from the causes of their eventual downfall.

CATTLE INTRODUCTION

The cattle on the Montana Prairies came from numerous sources. One of these sources that people always think about is the infamous Texas cattle drives. The Texans drove longhorns north from the plains and into Kansas to sell them to the railroad before pushing farther and farther north until they found new grazing ground in Montana and the surrounding regions. Teddy Blue Abbott writes in his book *We Pointed Them North* about his experiences driving cattle north into the plains of Montana from the overcrowded rangelands of Texas. He writes, “By 1880 Texas cattle had got as far North as Miles City, Montana.”² Miles City was a thriving metropolis centered around ranching along the Yellowstone River in the Great Plains region of Montana. The Texas cattle drive to Montana that Abbott recounts is typical of the many drives taken from the Southern states into the wide open spaces of Montana. These drives were undertaken due the overcrowding in Texas, free open land in Montana, and the rising of beef prices caused by the advent of railroad. Many ranches on the plains got their start in this way. Granville Stuart writes about the introduction of some of the earliest cattle from Texas in his journal and autobiography. Stuart was an early pioneer to the Montana region who arrived in search of furs and gold before eventually settling down as a cattle rancher.

Nelson Storey of Bozeman drove the first herd of Texas cattle into Montana in the spring of 1866. Storey purchased six hundred head of cattle at Dallas, Texas and started north with them, arriving in the Gallatin valley on December 4 and camped where Fort Ellis was later located³

² E.C. Abbott and Helena Huntington Smith, *We Pointed Them North; Recollections of a Cowpuncher* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 5. Abbott was a Texas cowboy who traveled north with the cattle herds in 1883. Abbott later began work for Granville Stuart, and early pioneer, and he eventually married one of Stuart’s daughters. Huntington recorded his story as it was told to her by him in his old age so there may be some embellishing in the text.

³ Granville Stuart and Paul C. Phillips. *Forty Years on the Frontier as Seen in the Journals and Reminiscences of Granville Stuart, Gold-miner, Trader, Merchant, Rancher and Politician* (Glendale, CA: A.H. Clark, 1957), 98 Stuart’s journal chronicles his coming to Montana, decision to start ranching, his search for ranching land, and his struggles he went through to start his first ranch.

These cattle are the first recorded instance of Texas cattle being driven into Montana from Texas. Fort Ellis was located in the mountain valley near Bozeman, Montana. This helped establish one of the first ranches in Montana at the time, just after the Civil War had occurred.

Montana cattle did not always originate with the Texas drives, however, despite what is commonly believed. They came from all sorts of sources across the continental United States, even from the west of Montana and Wyoming.

The Cattle business first gained a foothold on the northern Great Plains during the 1860's to meet the demand for food from the miners searching for gold and silver in the foothills and mountains around the fledging urban centres of Bannack, Virginia City and Helena in the western part of Montana. The earliest herds were made up mostly of exhausted and lame cattle abandoned or sold to traders by settlers making their way farther west through Utah. Later, larger numbers of so-called westerners were trailed back along the Oregon Trail from grazing lands near the Pacific seaboard.⁴

These claims are backed up by Granville Stuart's own journal entries. "In 1850 Capt. Richard Grant with his sons John and James Grant began trading along the Emigrant road in Utah for footsore and worn-out cattle and horses."⁵ These cattle and horses would likely be small in number and wouldn't lead to the start of any sort of substantial herd, but would be large enough to supply the settlers and miners with much needed beef to supplement their diet of wild game and other edibles from the land.

A fur trader named Richard Grant began swapping flour and other provisions for immigrants' worn out cattle. By the fall of 1843, Grant and his two sons had gathered a sizeable herd that they drove northward to the mountain valleys of what is now western Montana before winter set in. The cattle survived the winter's cold and snow. When spring came they were fat, and grant and his sons trailed them back to Fort Hall, where one good animal was traded for two worn-out ones. After about a dozen years of repeating this process annually,

⁴ Warren M. Elofson *Frontier Cattle Ranching in the Land and Times of Charlie Russell* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 8.

⁵ *Forty Years on the Frontier*, 97.

Grant and his sons sold the herd, by then more than six hundred head, and retired from the cattle business.⁶

Stuart then proceeds to further substantiate the claims of Montana Cattle originating in Oregon. “In 1878 D.S.G Flowerree purchased one thousand head of stock cattle in Oregon and placed them on the Sun River Range.”⁷ The Sun River Range is located near the present day town of Augusta, Montana, which is on the very edge of the plains and prairie region of Montana along the Missouri River near Great Falls.

The Oregon connection is evident in cattle driven into Wyoming as well. William Emsely Jackson was a cattle drover who kept a diary detailing his experiences on a cattle drive that took place in 1876 from La Grande, Oregon to Cheyenne, Wyoming.⁸ These alternate routes of cattle into the regions of interest may be less known than the Texas connection, but they are no less important in the settling of these ranching areas. “Between 1869 and 1875 more than 250,00 cattle were trailed from Oregon to the waiting ranges of Montana.”⁹ This is a very large amount of cattle flowing into the state and it cannot be ignored as a major source.

These western origins of Montana cattle also brought with them new and different customs than the Texas cattle drovers, because the mountains and forests of Oregon are markedly different than the plains of Texas for raising cattle. The cattle from these regions were also of a different breed than the Longhorns of Texas, meaning that the image of Longhorns dotting the plains as far as the eye can see is incorrect as well. Some of the earliest cattle to Montana were of the dairy varieties.

⁶ David Dary *Cowboy Culture: A Saga of Five Centuries* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1981), 228.

⁷ *Forty Years on the Frontier*, 98.

⁸ William Emsely Jackson and J. Orin Oliphant *William Emsley Jackson's Diary of a Cattle Drive from La Grande, Oregon to Cheyenne, Wyoming in 1876* (Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1984)

⁹ Richard W. Etulain *Beyond the Missouri: The Story of the American West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 186.

The first white man's cattle on the northern ranges were not Texas longhorns. They were eastern farm-raised cattle from places like Iowa, Missouri, and Illinois. They belonged to immigrants bound for the new territory of Oregon beginning in 1843, most of them destined to become farmers and stockmen. Many took their family cows with them. These cattle were mostly of the Durham or shorthorn strain, capable of producing milk.¹⁰

The dairy cattle were extremely useful due to the fact that fresh milk is both an important nutrient and valuable commodity for the settlers. The dairy breeds of cattle also tend to weigh more and provide more meat, although they were not as hardy or resilient as the Texas longhorns.

The path that these cattle took into the state varied greatly as well. The Texas herds were forced to traverse approximately 2,000 miles of flat, arid, dry plains that often lacked water. This region was known as the Great American Desert. Their route would also take them through lands controlled by the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Kiowa who were not on friendly terms with the United States government. Cattle thieves were also a prominent issue along the trail with "bands of renegade bushwhackers and Jayhawkers (raiders, especially in Kansas) stole nearly half of the cattle before they reached the railroad connections."¹¹ These thieves would plague the cattle drives for years to come and would help lead to well established routes around their hide outs. The Texas trails allowed for very large herds to be driven in, herds that could grow and fatten in the vast open prairies.

In comparison, the cattle driven in from Oregon only had to cover approximately 500 miles of territory that was inhabited by the relatively friendly Shoshone and Nez Perce tribes. These tribes were usually at peace with the white settlers and did not often attack the trail herds. However they were forced to pass through several large mountain ranges such as the Bitterroot and Rocky Mountains. This brought on a higher risk of being trapped in mountain passes or deep

¹⁰ Dary, 228.

¹¹ Etualain, 180.

snow and freezing or starving to death. Thieves were not a prominent issue, but wild animals such as grizzly bears and wolves could cause a herd to stampede. The trails and passes also were smaller and usually caused the herds to be smaller in size so that they could be easily handled in the cramped rugged forests.

These northern trails were more difficult to traverse for men, horses, and cattle than those running from Texas to Kansas. The roaring Snake River and several streams were harder to cross than the rivers on the southern plains, and nowhere in the south did cowboys have to pick their way through a glass-edged lava on the single northern trail. Then, too, temperature extremes in the north often made trail life more unbearable than in the south.¹²

Both routes had their advantages and disadvantages whether it was the flat, waterless plains or the rugged and treacherous mountains, neither one allowed for an easy ingress. Eventually as time went on, more established and safer routes would come into play, especially from Texas, which would lead to the massive herds found on the Montana and Wyoming Plains in the late 1880s and 1890s during the times of the cattle barons. The Oregon route would slowly begin to wither and die out as the Texas routes became safer and more traveled, as well as the fact that mining towns began to have railroads and could have their beef shipped in cheaper than buying it locally. The last major incursions by Oregon cattle occurred after the winter of 1880. “Blizzards swept across the plains and temperatures reached record lows. In the spring and summer after the great ‘die up’ not more than 100,00 cattle were driven east from Oregon. By then the great surplus of Oregon cattle was gone.”¹³

¹² Dary, 234.

¹³ Dary, 248.

REASONS FOR EXPANDING TO THE PLAINS

The reasons for coming to Montana or Wyoming to raise cattle were many. As illustrated above the market for beef to the mining towns in the western half of the state served as the earliest reasons for doing so. These miners and their families needed a large and steady supply of beef to feed them so that they could continue to dig for the precious minerals in the mountainous regions. Etulain writes about the selling to miners by cattlemen from Oregon. "By the 1860s and 1870s surplus cattle from these herds were available to the hungry miners in Idaho and Montana as well as to those establishing ranches in Montana."¹⁴ Due to the small size of the market, the ranchers could only sell to the miners and the town, there was no railroad or source of an outside market, the first herds into Montana tended to be small ones. "Most of the men who took up raising cattle in the sixties did so on a small scale. Some of them came as miners and then found they could make a more secure living by grazing a few cattle and marketing meat products in the new communities."¹⁵ Another factor to take into consideration was that the northern ranchers of the time did not know how to manage a large, open range ranch. "Most of the northern cattle farmers had small herds and knew the business of cattle raising only as it had been practiced along the Atlantic seaboard or on farms in the Middle West."¹⁶ Simply put, these ranchers operated on a small scale because that was all they knew how to do. Their smaller herds were well suited for the small markets and mountain pastures found in Western Montana and Wyoming.

As time went on, however, the railroads began to build farther west and north and ranching began to expand out onto the plains for economic reasons. "In 1870 assessment rolls of

¹⁴ Etulain, 186.

¹⁵ Elofson, 8.

¹⁶ Dary, 234.

Wyoming Territory list only 8,143 cattle. The following year almost four times as many cattle were driven into southeastern Wyoming.”¹⁷ The plains were beginning to become inviting to the Texas ranchers and their open plains style of grazing. Walter Von Richthofen recorded a quote by a successful Colorado rancher named James Wilson in his book *Cattle Raising on the North American Plains*.

‘A three year old fat steer in the South of Texas weighs 900 to 950 pounds; in the north of Texas 1,100 pounds; in New Mexico and south and middle Colorado 1,100 pounds; while in Wyoming, and still farther north in Montana, 1,200 to 1,300 pounds.’¹⁸

As can be seen one of the reasons for bringing the cattle into Montana and Wyoming was the fact that the cattle were considerably fatter than Texas or anywhere else’s cattle. Fatter cattle mean a higher price and thus more money to be made.

The plains of Montana and Wyoming were also ill suited for farming due to the lack of rainfall and the sandiness of the soil, but was very well suited for the raising of cattle. “Wyoming and Montana have but a few farms, and are best adapted to stock raising.”¹⁹ This lack of good farming ground would lead to massive unfenced ranches of the cattle barons and cattle corporations from back east who utilized the unsettled land to turn a profit. That doesn’t mean that the settlers did not try to farm ground, however, it just means that many tried and failed whereupon the cattle kingdoms usurped their lands.

One of the problems facing cattle ranchers on the plains were the hostile Native Americans. The Montana and Wyoming plains were home to the Cheyenne, Crow, and Sioux nations. The Crow were often friendly with the whites due to their need for an ally against the

¹⁷ Dary, 239.

¹⁸ Walter Von Richthofen, *Cattle-raising on the Plains of North America* (New York: Appleton, 1885), 56-57. Von Richthofen was the uncle of the famed Red Baron of WWI. He immigrated to America in 1877 and was highly involved in the areas around Denver, Colorado as well as being greatly interested in frontier ranching.

¹⁹ Von Richthofen, 99.

more powerful Sioux and Cheyenne tribes, but they were small in number. The Sioux were extremely hostile to whites encroaching upon their lands and were known to attack any who tried to settle there. They had made a treaty with the United States government that prevented settlers from living in Northern Wyoming and Eastern Montana. “It (the land) belonged to the Sioux, and the treaty of 1868 said cattlemen had to stay out.”²⁰ This treaty was enforced by the United States Army, who from their frontier forts, kept ranchers and settlers from entering these rich, untouched grazing ranges. The annihilation of the 7th Cavalry at the Battle of the Little Big Horn was what led to the eventual annulment of the treaty. This opened these virgin grazing grounds to the ranchers.

Civilization was another reason that the cattlemen began to move north. Towns brought with them settlers and farmers who fenced off the land and took over the water holes. These advancements took the land from the large open-range pastures and herds. The United States as a country was beginning to undertake the ideal of Manifest Destiny that helped open the Oregon Trail and California gold fields. This version, however, led to the settling of the nation’s vast empty interior. The railroad opened a new and lucrative market for cattle, but it also brought land hungry immigrants looking for their own piece of the American dream. Farms began to take precedence upon the Kansas and Nebraska plains as they all looked for their own land to settle upon. Teddy Abbott writes about the direct affect that this settling had upon his family in his memoirs. “By the end of the seventies, Nebraska was getting settled up, and my father went to farming. But I stayed with the cattle and went north with them.”²¹ The farmers set up homesteads upon the open range public lands within these states. The homesteaders plowed fields and fenced off what was previously wide-open pasture land to prevent cattle from damaging their crops.

²⁰ Dary, 241.

²¹ Abbott, 4.

This loss of grazing areas forced the large open range ranchers to look elsewhere for new grazing grounds for their cattle. These ranchers inevitably looked north. "The region was generally free of settlers, and in spite of the severe winters, many Texans began to leave their old ranges in the south to begin anew in the north."²² In short, the Texas ranchers were forced to move out of the mid-west's public lands and settle upon the plains region for one of the same reasons that the Native Americans were forced out of their traditional lands, overcrowding caused by the advancement of white civilization and settlement.

Despite all of these enticing developments and changes with the region, the Montana and Wyoming plains remained relatively unsettled until the 1880s.

Three factors had prevented invasion of the Bad Lands area by cattlemen before 1880: Indian difficulties, lack of transportation, and the large herds of buffalo, which were common to the northern plains. The entry of the Northern Pacific Railroad into Montana Territory in 1881 solved the transportation problem. The efforts of the army in the years immediately following the annihilation of Custer's command broke the power of the Indian. And the coming of the railroad, along with the demand for buffalo hides, resulted in the quick destruction of the buffalo herds.²³

These changes to the status quo in the plains regions of these states were just what the cattlemen needed.

The advancement of settlements may have yanked the public lands out from under the large open range ranchers in Texas and Kansas, but Montana provided them with a place to relocate their vast herds. Now that the native people and United States government were no longer standing in their way, the Plains of Montana and Wyoming were beginning to look increasingly inviting to the Texas ranchers. The railroads gave them a market men were eager to exploit for large profits. This newly free ground combined with the large profits to be made in

²² Dary, 243.

²³ Donald H. Welsh, "Cosmopolitan Cattle King...Pierre Wibaux and the W Bar Ranch." *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* V, no. 2 (Spring 1955), 7.

these unsettled lands led to a new age for ranching within the region. The age of the cattle barons and large corporations had arrived.

PLAINS SETTLEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

The cattle barons were men who moved into these vast, unsettled plains, took large tracts of unsettled lands, and used them to graze vast herds. Joining them were investors from the East and Europe who saw the fortune to be made in open range grazing and set up large corporation ranches to take advantage of these circumstances. These ranches were often managed by a knowledgeable cattleman who helped the investors turn a profit on their often expensive gamble. The amount of new cattle in the state after the plains were opened speaks for themselves. “The number of Montana beeves jumping from 250,000 in 1880 to 600,00 by 1883.”²⁴ At this time the plains regions of these two states was full of lush grasses and open watering holes. With grass waving for as far as the eye could see and no fences or towns in sight, the open-range ranches appeared to be an institution that was here to stay.

The small ranches that had previously been a mainstay of the Montana and Wyoming regions supplying beef to small mining towns and the few settlers quickly became obsolete as massive herds pushed into the regions. These herds crowded the smaller ranchers off their pastures and began to take over or buy out their water rights due to their large financial backing. “The smaller herds have gradually disappeared, their owners either forming partnerships with one another or selling out to larger companies,”²⁵ Richthofen wrote in 1885. Granville Stuart was one of the few early ranchers who managed to survive into this new era of large herds. He continued to work at expanding his range and moved his ranchlands east from the mountains into the plains. Stuart did this by taking on rich Eastern investors.

During the summer of 1879 a co-partnership was entered into between A.J. Davis of Butte, Erwin Davis of New York City, Samuel A. Hauser, and

²⁴ Etulain, 187.

²⁵ Von Richthofen, 52.

Granville Stuart of Helena, Montana, for the purpose of engaging in the business of cattle raising. The capital stock of the firm was one hundred fifty thousand dollars. The brand was “H”. The firm name Davis, Hauser and Co. The interests were divided into thirds; the Davis Brothers one-third, Hauser one-third, and Stuart one-third. I was elected superintendent and general manager and directed to begin at once to look about for stock cattle that could be purchased at a satisfactory price.²⁶

Stuart then set out to start a ranch upon the Montana plains near present day Lewistown, Montana. This ranch later became the DHS ranch and was among the first large, open-range ranches within the area. Stuart can thus be considered among the first of the Montana cattle barons. His herd would prosper and “our outfit branded thirty-eight hundred and eighty-one calves” during a roundup in 1885.²⁷ Granville Stuart would go on to becoming one of the most successful early ranchers in Montana and was the first president of the Montana Stock-Growers Association, a group that is still active to this day. He eventually sold his holdings and left the ranching business for good. Stuart’s success can be seen as occurring for two reasons. The first and most important reason was the backing of powerful and rich Eastern investors who supplied Stuart with the necessary capital to start a large operation. Secondly, Stuart was able to run his cattle on the free, open range where at the time no major ranches were located. His cattle were among the first of the large herds.

European investors played a large role in the massive open range ranches within these two states. These overseas investors realized that there was a fortune to be made in the cattle ranching business due to the demands for beef in the cities as well as overseas. Due to the settling of public lands in the Mid-West and Texas, Montana and Wyoming appeared to be prime locations for investors to start a ranch.

The Powder River Cattle Company of Wyoming has a capital stock of 300,000 and includes among its directors the Duke of Manchester, William

²⁶ Stuart, 99.

²⁷ Stuart, 230.

Tipping, Lord Henry Neville Ernest Berkel Denison, and Andrew Whitton. The landed property is valued at \$258,000... The Marquis de Mores, the French cattle king on the Little Missouri River in Montana, is constructing buildings necessary for the purpose of killing and dressing beef on this range, and his intention is to kill eighty beeves, or two car loads per day. A company has been organized in St Paul, under the name of the Northern Pacific Refrigerator Car Company with a capital of \$200,000. It has a contract for ten years with the Northern Pacific Railroad and will transport the meat from this place.²⁸

These European investors had come to the region to make money, lured here by the promise of free, open ranges for the taking and ready profits to be made. Even European nobility was beginning to become involved!

One cattle baron who achieved great success on the plains was Pierre Wibaux. He was a Frenchman who came to the Eastern Montana prairie to try his hand at the ranching game. Wibaux came to the states with little money and founded the W Bar ranch in what is presently known as Wibaux County, Montana.

At its peak, in the 1890's, the W Bar outfit of Pierre Wibaux probably owned about 65,000 cattle and 300 saddle horses. In 1890 over 12,000 cattle were shipped out. From 10,00 to 12,00 calves were branded, yearly, in the early 1890's; and during this period Wibaux employ at least 25 cowboys in the Busy season and 10 during the winter months. W Bar cattle grazed over a large territory, some of them drifting as far south as Wyoming, west to the Powder River, and east to the Killdeer Mountains.²⁹

These numbers show that Wibaux became one of the leading cattlemen of the 1890s within Eastern Montana. His herds were vast and his herd numerous. Wibaux is but one example of the Europeans who came to Montana to make a fortune in the ranching business.

²⁸ Von Richthofen, 51.

²⁹ Welsh, 14.

VIGILANTES AND RUSTLERS

The cattle business was an extremely lucrative and successful business. Wherever money is being easily made, men who wish to acquire it through dishonest means were soon to follow. Just as banks were often robbed and mining shipments hijacked in the settling of the west, cattle were often rustled. The large ranchers began to face a new threat from cattle thieves and rustlers. Montana and Wyoming chose two separate paths to dealing with this new found threat

Montana did not really have range wars...The comparative calm seems to have been the result of a more paternal attitude that developed among some of the most respected big ranchers towards smaller-scale farmers and settlers who moved in amongst them. Far from chasing them from the plains, Granville Stuart and others are known to have built local schools for their children, allowed them to milk their range cows when times were tough, and helped them financially by employing them...They also apparently helped them recover stolen horses and cattle. In Wyoming and other states, by contrast, the big men declared open war on anyone who invaded what they considered their space. Many of the members of their so-called citizen action committees were simply hired guns, and they killed and ran off outlaws and *bona fide* settlers alike.³⁰

The different methods would both prove to have vastly different outcomes in the end.

Rustlers operated in numerous ways. They would steal the cattle from the large, open plain ranchers where it was hard to keep an eye on the cattle and drive them to market and sell them before anyone even knew they were gone. "They had \$35,000,000 worth of property scattered over seventy-five thousand square miles of practically uninhabited country."³¹ It would be next to impossible to catch many of these men in the act. "It was easy for a rustler to cut a pasture fence, drive the weaned calves to his ranch, and brand them as his own."³² They could also re-brand the cattle with one of their own that masked the animal's original brand, effectively

³⁰ Elofson, 186.

³¹ Stuart, 196.

³² Dary, 325.

stealing it and any calves the cow had from then on. “During an 1885 round-up near Macleod a number of cows of the Oxley Ranch were found with the letters QC burned over the Oxley brand.”³³ Another popular method of rustling was to steal the calves from the cow as soon as they were born and claim that your cattle had twins. Granville Stuart writes about this, “Near our home ranch we discovered one rancher whose cows invariably had twin calves and frequently triplets, while the range cows in that vicinity were nearly all barren.”³⁴ Losing livestock like this massively cut into a rancher’s profits and could quickly ruin them. “At the close of the fall roundup (1883) our tallies showed that we had suffered at least a three per cent loss from ‘rustling’,”³⁵ Stuart wrote in his journals. In an open range herd of over three thousand head, this would be a loss of ninety head of cattle. At the \$20.00 a head going rate in the 1880s this would mean a loss of almost \$1,800.00, a substantial sum of money at the time. The cattlemen couldn’t afford to lose calves to wild animals, the weather, and his fellow man all three. Rustlers and cattle thieves were something that could and needed to be dealt with.

The cattle barons in Montana dealt with the rustlers in the same way that they had acquired their ranches, with force. “ ‘We here in the West have to occasionally take matters into our own hands...because of the many failures of justice owing to the sympathies of some jurors [and] legal technicalities at to evidence, jurisdiction,’ and so on,”³⁶ Granville Stuart wrote in a letter to a fellow rancher. A rancher did not have time to travel back and forth to courts and testify in the unlikely event that they captured a rustler red handed. Most of the evidence was also often mere suspicions or circumstantial and thus the thieves were very hard to convict. The courts were often located several days ride from the ranch itself as well, which caused the

³³ Elofson, 84.

³⁴ Stuart, 195.

³⁵ Stuart, 195.

³⁶ Elofson, 88.

rancher to waste precious time traveling back and forth between the ranch and the court at the county seat. This led to many of the cattle barons to form vigilante committees and administer their own forms of frontier justice, often at the end of a rope. Rustlers were often hung without trial, both to expedite the process and send a message to other rustlers to get out or face the same consequences. This business could often be both dangerous and bloody. “The rustlers of that day were a different class of men from the sneak thieves of today. They went in armed bands, took what they wanted by force, and defied arrest,”³⁷ Teddy Abbott wrote in his memoirs. Clearly something had to be done.

Cattlemen often came together to form Stock Grower’s Associations to discuss and combat rustling within their territories. Both Montana and Wyoming formed these organizations and both are still active today, albeit in less of a direct action role. “A meeting of stockmen was called at Helena on October 16 to consider what best to do”³⁸ Granville Stuart wrote in his journals. The Montana Stock Grower’s Association voted in 1884 to “take no action against the ‘rustlers’.”³⁹ This move would prove to be a mistake and only emboldened the rustlers and caused them to become even bolder in their actions. Drastic action needed to be taken to set things right in the Montana Badlands.

The bold and unrepentant stealing had struck the final chord with the Montana cattle barons; the vigilante committees began to form for a “cleanup”. “It was Granville Stuart who organized and led the vigilantes and carried out the horse-thief clean-up at the mouth of the Mussleshell in July of 1884”⁴⁰ according to Teddy Abbott. Rustlers were tracked to their hideouts and either forced to leave the country or hung.

³⁷ Abbott, 132.

³⁸ Stuart, 195.

³⁹ Stuart, 197.

⁴⁰ Abbott, 132.

On July 3, 1884, a horse thief by the name of Sam McKenzie was hanged between Fort Maginnis and the D H S ranch. The next day fourteen men under Stuart left the D H S and rode to the mouth of the Musselshell. They hanged Billy Downs and another fellow there and two more at Rocky Point.⁴¹

As Granville Stuart himself wrote about the hanging of Billy Downs:

Downs himself was stealing horses and killing cattle. Downs was a married man and his wife was at the wood yard with him. Because of sympathy for the woman, he was warned that he was being watched and that if he did not change his tactics he was sure to get into trouble. He paid not the least attention to the warning, but continued to surround himself with the worst characters on the river and kept on stealing horses and killing cattle. On the night of July 4, a committee of vigilantes arrived at the Downs' place and called on him to come out. This at first he refused to do but after a short parley he did come out, accompanied by a notorious character known as California Ed. Both men plead guilty to stealing ponies from the Indians but denied they had stolen from white men, but they failed to account for the twenty-six horses in the corral, all bearing well-known brands. They claimed that the quantity of dried meat found in the house was dried buffalo meat, notwithstanding the fact that there had not been a buffalo on the range for more than two years. In the stable was a stack of fresh hides folded and salted ready to be shipped down the river, all bearing the brand of the Fergus Stock Co. The two men were taken out to a little grove or trees and hanged.⁴²

These hangings were only the beginning of the cleanup that would help to rid the cattle barons in Montana of the scourge of rustling for good.

Once the vigilante committees in Montana started, they set about their task with a vengeance. They proceeded to sweep the badlands that were the haunts of horse and cattle thieves and hang anyone that they found. They even took prisoners who had managed to escape their wrath by being arrested by a deputy U.S. marshal and hung them themselves. "At the mouth of the Musselshell a posse met Fischel (the marshal) and took the prisoners from him...and the

⁴¹ Abbott, 132.

⁴² Stuart, 205-206.

four men were hanged.”⁴³ These actions combined with the numerous untried executions led to numerous outcries and protests against the Montana vigilante committees and the cattle barons.

There arose a great hue and cry in certain localities over what was termed “the arrogance of the cattle kings.”... There were but fourteen member of the vigilance committee and they were all men who had stock on the range and who suffered at the hands of the thieves. There was not one man taken on suspicion and no one was hanged for a first offense. The men that were taken were member of an organized band of thieves that for more than two years had evaded the law and robbed the range at will.⁴⁴

Granville Stuart believed that his and the other cattle barons’ actions were justified for these reasons. No matter how one feels about the justification of the vigilantes actions the fact remains that “This clean-up of horse thieves put a stop to horse and cattle stealing in Montana for many years.”⁴⁵

The Wyoming Stock Growers Association chose a different path than vigilante committees to deal with their rustler problem. The ranchers in Wyoming began to use hired gunmen and “detectives” to combat the rustlers. This hiring of mercenaries quickly spiraled out of control with numerous innocents being killed and eventually escalated into what has become known as the Johnson County War.

Four prominent cattlemen...went to Denver, where they hired some ex-sheriffs, former U.S. marshals, and a few other trusted gunmen...All of these hired “guardsmen,” as the cattlemen called them, were given an advance of “hush and travel” money and told to meet in Denver in early April. The committee of four cattlemen, representing the large cattle companies and the powerful Wyoming Stock Growers’ Association to which the large and frequently absentee-owned companies belonged, next arranged for a special train to transport the guardsmen north to Cheyenne.⁴⁶

These “guardsmen” were in Wyoming to protect the cattle barons and large corporations interests. They began to operate as their own private army with a list of alleged rustlers compiled

⁴³ Stuart, 208.

⁴⁴ Stuart, 209.

⁴⁵ Stuart, 209.

⁴⁶ Dary, 326.

by the large stock growers of the area. They began to attack anyone whom they considered to be a threat to them and their employers' interest. This led to the local civilians and small ranchers taking actions into their own hands. A posse to combat the mercenaries was formed and the private army tracked down and besieged at a local ranch.

Later in the day Sheriff Red Angus and forty additional men arrived at the TA Ranch from Buffalo. Angus took command, and as word of the invasion spread, other reinforcements arrived from Johnson and nearby Sheridan counties. The posse seems to have been made up of honest law-abiding citizens and perhaps some of the rustlers, all opposed to the unlawful invasion by the "cattle barons," as they called the big ranchers.⁴⁷

The battle eventually attracted the attention of the President of the United States who sent in the military to sort things out. Surprisingly enough throughout the entire siege no one was killed on either side, the gunmen were sent home, and the cattle barons quit using private armies to do their bidding. Thus ended the unsuccessful attempt of the cattle barons of Wyoming to combat their rustler problem.

Montana and Wyoming chose extremely different paths to deal with what they perceived as a threat to their existence and livelihoods. Montana formed vigilance committees and proceeded to "clean-up" the rustler and horse thief hideouts themselves. They either ordered the men to move to a new and healthier climate or hanged men whom they considered to be repeat offenders who did not change their ways and leave the area. This "clean-up" proved to be highly effective and ended the large scale rustling on the Montana plains and badlands open range until the end of open range pastures. The Wyoming cattle barons chose to hire outside gunmen to combat what they perceived as the threat to their operations, and this paid for violence combined with the suspect nature of the private armies actions led the U.S. Cavalry becoming involved and putting an end to their own private army's actions. This use of force cast a black mark against the

⁴⁷ Dary, 329.

Wyoming cattle barons and caused them to lose much of their support. Clearly doing the work themselves and only using actions against men who were clearly outlaws was a much more effective means to combat rustling as shown in Montana and by the Wyoming cattle barons' failures.

THE BLIZZARD OF 1886-87 AND THE END OF THE CATTLE BARONS

The time of the large corporation ranches and cattle barons was a limited one upon the Montana and Wyoming plains however. Numerous troubles began to emerge that helped force an end to massive open-grazing ranches of the area. “Bad weather, shifting markets, uncertain financial arrangements, and competition for land with nesters (farmers) had conspired, along with disastrous winters, to put an end to the heyday.”⁴⁸ The cattle barons and corporations would soon be finished.

One of the worst blows to Montana Wyoming ranching occurred during the winter of 1886-87. The region experienced one of the worst blizzards it had since settling began.

The snow-fall was unprecedented, both for its depth and the way it lasted; and it was this and not the cold that caused the loss. About the middle of November the storms began. Day after day the snow came down, thawing and then freezing and piling itself higher and higher. By January the drifts had filled the ravines and coulees almost level. The snow lay in great masses on the plateaus and river bottoms; and this lasted until the end of February. The proceeding summer we had been visited by a prolonged drought, so that the short, scanty grass was already well cropped down; the snow covered what pasturage there was to a depth of several feet, and the cattle could not get at it all, and could hardly move around... the starving cattle died by scores of thousands before their helpless owners eyes.⁴⁹

This blizzard devastated many ranches and left numerous cattle barons and corporations in dire financial straits. One example can be taken from the story of Alexander Swan, who operated a large corporation for European investors. “Heavy snow and very cold temperatures reduced San’s herds from 113,000 to 57,000 head, and in May of 1887, the almost legendary company

⁴⁸ Etulain, 188.

⁴⁹ Theodore Roosevelt, *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*. (New York: The Century Company 1888), 77-78. This book was written by the future president during his time ranching in the North Dakota badlands that border Eastern Montana. The ranching style here is the same as that practiced upon the Montana and Wyoming plains region. Roosevelt ranched within the region during the 1880’s and served as a deputy sheriff until his return to politics in the East after the blizzard of 1886-87 wiped out his herds.

went into receivership. Swan's own fortune was lost in the bankruptcy proceedings."⁵⁰ The blizzard was a crushing blow to the cattlemen of the region. "The Big Die-up of 1886-87 decimated more than half of many northern herds. Some owners lost more than 70 to 80 percent of their cattle. Most of the free-grass-and-open-range cattle business on the Plains and in the Rockies was at an end."⁵¹ These were losses that many cattlemen could not recover from quickly. European and Eastern investors who had money invested in the big gamble found themselves in dire financial straits. The cattle business that had been returning enormous profits for the past six years was suddenly no longer such a sure thing. The investors were faced with the shocking reality that the cattle business was not a fail proof game. Something as unpredictable and unmanageable as the weather could wipe out years worth of work in just one storm. The investors that did not go bankrupt and lose everything were loath to play this game again and many refused to re-invest in large herds. This loss of ready money for the ranchers to stock their land with caused ranch sizes to shrink during the 1890s. The cattlemen were forced to stock the land themselves which led to smaller, more manageable herds. Pierre Wibaux was one of the few who realized a financial success out of the ruins of the terrible winters.

Wibaux formulated a plan of purchasing as many remnants of former herds as his capital would permit. As a result of his experience on the range, he knew the only the strongest cattle had been able to survive the rigors of the winter. He knew that the range was no longer overstocked. He also knew that the larger part of the remnants were composed of older steers which had been able to struggle through the winter when young steers, calves, and most of the female stock had frozen or starved... Pierre bought remnants of many herds at a very low price from ranchers who, discouraged and anxious to leave the range area, sold their surviving stock at sacrifice prices. He purchased other cattle from eastern and foreign concerns which had suffered losses up to 90 percent and were anxious to salvage what they could from their original investments...By 1890 he had accumulated 40,000 head of cattle, and he branded 10,000 calves.⁵²

⁵⁰ Dary, 252.

⁵¹ Etulain, 188.

⁵² Welsh, 9-10.

Wibaux managed to parlay this and other wise investments into the massive and successful ranch discussed previously. He remains one of the few true cattle barons to successfully survive the end of open-range grazing.

Settlement was another factor that helped bring an end to the massive holdings of the barons. Just as had occurred in Kansas and Nebraska mere ten years before, the railroad brought homesteaders to the region. These settlers began to farm and fence the previously undisturbed regions just as they had in the Mid-Western states. Theodore Roosevelt wrote about the need of open spaces for large cattle barons, "Cattle-ranching can only be carried on in its present form while the population is scanty; and so, in stock-raising regions, pure and simple, there are usually few towns, and these are almost always at the shipping point for cattle."⁵³ The need of wide-open, unsettled places was vital to the corporation ranches and cattle barons. The towns were only welcomed as shipping points for their beef and supply points. The towns took up space and water that the cattle barons needed to raise their beef in as well as served as a starting point for settlers.

The civilization and settlers that the railroads brought were not looked upon with favor either. Settlers didn't like to see their wheat fields trampled by the open-range cattle. They began to build barbed wire fences around their fields and water holes. Many of these homesteaders also possessed cattle of their own. If allowed to roam freely as the cattle baron's herds were, the homesteader's cattle would often drift into the larger herds of the surrounding areas. Any calves these cows had would be rounded up and branded during the round-up season, often with brands that were not their own. To prevent this the homesteaders began to fence in pastures for their cattle so that they could be easily kept separate from the surrounding areas herds. These pastures

⁵³ Roosevelt, 7.

would have to include a water source, which led them to fence off water holes. In the arid plains where watering sources were few and far between, those who controlled the water controlled the land. The fences served to partition the land into smaller areas and make large herds impossible to keep. A Pueblo Indian chief once remarked after becoming lost in west Texas on the way to his home in Taos “ “Alambre! alambre! alambre! todas partes!’ (‘Wire! wire! wire! everywhere!’) Barbed wire had so changed the lay of the land in the Indians’ eyes that even they were confused.”⁵⁴

One of the largest factors that contributed to the downfall of the cattle barons and large corporation ranches in Montana and Wyoming was the overstocking of the range. Overstocking occurs when too many cattle are run upon too little land. This stock overgrazes the native grasses. “Overstocking is the great danger threatening the stock-raising industry on the plains.”⁵⁵ The constant and persistent overgrazing causes the grass to not grow back, especially when the area is hit with a particularly dry summer in which the grasses do not receive the proper amount of moisture. Although the vast open plains of the region seemed to be prime grazing grounds, many large ranches were founded when Montana and Wyoming were undergoing a period of wet springs and summers. This all changed after the great blizzards. The drought that followed the blizzard prevented grass growth and left the already winter starved cattle with nothing to graze upon. “Grazing areas were already overstocked...During the winter of 1885, freezing snow and cold destroyed a majority of many hers, and the following dry summer left little grass for remaining cattle. Yet more cattle arrive, from Texas and from the Northwest, to fight for the diminishing pastures.”⁵⁶ The dry weather coupled with overstocking meant that the pastures were

⁵⁴ Dary, 331.

⁵⁵ Roosevelt, 18.

⁵⁶ Etulain, 188.

not able to handle the increase in cattle. The overstocking of what had seemed to be bountiful and endless rangeland had eventually contributed to the massive herd's downfall.

CONCLUSIONS

The ranching within these two regions began upon a small scale to provide beef for the miners and mining towns of the area. The men who began these ranches procured their cattle primarily from the wagon trains along the Oregon Trail as well as from Oregon itself. This source of Montana and Wyoming cattle is not a well known one to the common public. Many people believe the myth that the first cattle into Montana came up the trails from Texas with the great trail herds. This is simply not the case. This interesting and new source of cattle is one that should be recognized and respected for how it helped to shape ranching within the region.

The opening of the plains in Montana and Wyoming had a lasting and permanent economical as well as historical impact upon the region. The ranchers who were becoming crowded out in Texas and Nebraska were given new rangeland to raise their massive herds. European and Eastern investors saw the large returns to be made in this business and helped to make the region into vast corporation ranches as well as home to numerous and influential cattle barons. Men like Granville Stuart and Pierre Wibaux, who quickly become power players within the state's politics as well as economy due to their control of large herds and tracts of land. The cattlemen were forced to adapt for the weather and fight off wild animals such as wolves and bears in this unsettled land to build their herds. As more and more men began to move into the area, the cattle barons faced a new threat, rustlers, which they faced very successfully in Montana through the use of vigilance committees to help build huge cattle empires. The Wyoming cattle barons were less ethical and successful in their approach to the rustling solution and their loss of face over using hired gunmen proved to be embarrassing and lost them much of their support.

These empires were eventually toppled by a series of blizzards and droughts, proving that even with all the money in the world, mother nature still rules the ranching business. Homesteaders brought the civilization and fences with them that proved to be the downfall to the ranches in Texas and Nebraska earlier. Smaller pastures and controlled water sources meant that a rancher had to buy the land instead of just claiming it for his own. These factors spelled doom for the vast open range ranches and helped to shape the range into what it is today, one of small-family oriented ranches, although large corporations are still present in some areas.

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